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The Influence of the Language of Rap Music

Sex, drugs, and violence. These are the terms most commonly associated with the very controversial, but very popular, genre of music known as rap. Believe it or not, however, there is much more that makes up this unique and exciting style of music than those negative terms. Are there rap songs that talk about sex in a way that demeans women? Yes. Are there rap songs that encourage the usage of illegal drugs? Absolutely. Are there rap songs that condone violence and killing? Without a doubt. However, does *every* rap song that has ever been written fall into one of these categories? The answer is no. People always like to say, “don’t judge a book by its cover”, so I came up with a new phrase – don’t judge a song by its genre.

What is rap music? To those who have never heard it, or at least not heard much, it may seem like just a person talking fast and rambling on about various topics. However, those who truly know and love the genre would tell those people just how wrong they are. They would tell those people that rapping is a unique and difficult skill set that combines intelligence, lyricism, and storytelling. Some would even argue that rap is a form of poetry, as both involve rhyming in a way that uses various emotions in order to get specific points across to the listener. Obviously, not all the topics discussed in rap music are ones that would be considered “positive”, but that is actually what makes the genre so appealing to many. Especially to the youth, rap is often looked to by teenagers and young adults to provide them with insight to some of the more dubious topics that life has to offer. Whether this is a good thing or not, rap can provide kids with answers to many of the questions they may not feel comfortable asking a parent or guardian.

Hip Hop and rap music has become one of the most popular genres of music to listen to, especially among teens, which has led to it being an issue of concern for many. Whether it be the frequent amount of swearing or the controversy in many of the topics discussed, rap has become a form of music that contains content most parents don’t want their kids to listen to. With so much vulgar and profane material, it is certainly understandable for any parent to not be jumping at the thought of their child locking themselves away in their room and blasting all the newest rap albums. However, if that particular parent has never actually listened to any of the songs themselves, is it really fair to be so quick to shun the genre as a whole?

No other genre of music even comes close to the amount of disputation that surrounds rap, which makes it one of the most interesting and important topics to research in the music industry. In his article on the five most controversial rap albums of all time, Trevor Tompkins dives into this theory by explaining:

Hip-hop music has generated more controversy than any other genre in recent decades. Rap’s effect on society has been heavily debated over the years with numerous opinions. Some people say that rappers benefit society by raising awareness and bringing light to some of the awful things that go on in their respective neighborhoods, while others criticize rappers for spreading negativity and the promotion of crime and violence. (Tompkins 1)

There has been much debate over whether rap music is more bad than good, as there are so many factors that must be considered. When looking at the negative side of things, it is easy to identify the main points of concern, which is the encouragement of crime, violence, referring to women as sex objects, and experimental drug use. Obviously, none of these things are good, but do some carry more weight than others as far as their effect on the minds of those who listen to it? According to James D. Johnson, Lee Anderson Jackson, and Leslie Gatto, the authors of their academic article on the negative effects of rap music entitled “Violent Attitudes and Deferred Academic Aspirations: Deleterious Effects of Exposure to Rap Music”, they believe that the encouragement and acceptance of violence discussed in rap is the most harmful, as they express, “the major concern about rap music is that it may affect attitudes and behavior regarding the use of violence. There is concern that rap lyrics, such as those suggesting that African-Americans are ‘in a state of war’ with Whites and that African Americans should be ‘Cop Killers,’ (Ice-T), may increase the probability that listeners will engage in violent behavior” (Johnson, Jackson, Gatto 28).

Opinions on what the most negative effect that rap has on its listeners certainly vary, as many other people would argue that its general language towards women is what stirs up the most embroilment. One of these people is Brandon Albert, who explains how he feels rap lyrics demean women in his article titled “Hip-Hop: The False Advertisement of Women” where he goes on to explain, “Unfortunately, sex sells in our society, and the media has uncovered this fixation. Hip-hop has convinced a large portion of society that this is how women should be treated, but new times call for new measures and it is time that the people recognize and give women the respect that they truly deserve” (Albert 1).

Albert, however, is not alone in his theory that the sexual nature of rap music is having a contravening effect on our society. In an article for the Los Angeles Times, Erin Aubry spoke to several teenage girls about their opinion of rap music and whether or not it is disrespectful towards the female gender. The response that stood out the most to me came from Frances Perez, who at the time was a 17 year old senior at Gardena High School. Perez stated:

Rap gives women a bad image when it calls them things like bitch, slut and whore. Videos make them seem like sex objects. They focus on their bodies, not their intelligence or their minds. All you ever see is girls in bikinis. Guys listen to that music, and it influences how they talk to girls. If guys look up to rappers, that's a bad role model for them to be following. (Aubry 1)

The third main issue of the three headed monster that is rap music is the sharp up rise in the amount of drug references. In his article detailing how rap music glorifies drug use, Robert Preidt of ABC News spoke to Denise Herd, a researcher at the University of California, who was able to shed quite a bit of light on the topic. Herd revealed that their studies found that of the 38 most popular rap songs between 1979 and 1984, only four (11 percent) contained drug references. By the late 1980s, that increased to 19 percent and by 1993, to 69 percent. Along with these alarming statistics, Herd spoke upon how she felt about the overall climb of drug references in rap songs, stating, “Positive portrayals of drug use have increased over time, and drug references increased overall. This is an alarming trend, as rap artists are role models for the nation's youth, especially in urban areas. Many of these young people are already at risk and need to get positive messages from the media” (Preidt 1).

Despite this alarming and unpleasant information, don’t be so quick to join team “anti-rap” just yet. While there is no denying that the previously stated information is true of a large amount of rap music, that does not in fact mean that is true of all of it. There is still a great amount of “good” rap music that exists, but due to it not being as much of an issue, it sits alone in a corner and tends to go unnoticed. It is no secret that the media lives for negativity, as those stories that contain the most controversy often coincide with containing the most amount of views from the public. The same goes for rap music, as even though songs with a more positive message attached to it sit better with the public, they also can get easily overlooked.

The culture of rap and hip-hop has been the poster child for negativity for quite some time now, but there are many who believe that it is unfair to group every rap artist into one single category and simply label it “negative”. Despite all of the back and forth squabble that comes with discussing rap music, the genre can certainly have a positive influence on listeners and expand their musical horizons. One online article titled “Impacts of Rap Music on Youths” agrees wholeheartedly with the notion that rap can be positive, by claiming:

The reality is that rap music is greatly misunderstood. The media often portrays rap music as negative and focuses on rap music more when it is related to something undesirable. Many media stories identify rap music as a catalyst in problems such as teen pregnancy, crime or some other negative social issue that existed long before rap music became prevalent. The truth of the matter is that there is rap music that is positive and can serve the purpose of improving social consciousness by increasing awareness of some of the issues that many residents of our nation’s inner cities face. Just because a rap artist speaks of less than desirable subjects in his or her music does not mean that they intend to corrupt the minds of the audience. Rap music is entertainment and should not be treated any differently than any other form of entertainment out there. The bottom line is that all rap music is not degenerate and consideration should be taken when analyzing the message that the music is presenting. (Impacts 1)

At first listen, it may appear that rappers are simply “bragging” when they talk of making millions of dollars, wearing the most expensive clothes, driving the fanciest cars, and basically living the dream. However, believe it or not, all of this boasting can actually have a beneficial effect on society. In his article on rap music, Pete Cashmore reveals how this kind of talk in rap music can actually lead to cases of listeners beating depression. His article details a study performed by psychiatrist Dr. Akeem Sule and clinical neuroscientist Dr. Becky Inkster, in which they propose the theory that a lot of the rags-to-riches stories told in rap music actually displays positive visual imagery, which is a psychotherapeutic technique in which one envisions the place where one would like to be, which leads to the progression of being in a better mental place. Cashmore reveals:

The therapeutic effects of rap and its use as a positive tool for education and personal development are well documented, as indeed they are for most forms of artistic expression and their beneficial effect on those who experience depression – I myself started battle rapping at the age of 38 and the pure catharsis I found through my performances was overwhelming and life-changing. But Sule and Inkster are offering a slightly different angle, that, in a nutshell, imagining a heavily blinged-out version of yourself taking your pet panther for a walk is an important step towards actually becoming that person (panther optional). That you might never get there is not the point – for someone experiencing the sometimes brutal mental pummeling of depression, to even see yourself as “winning” is a victory in itself. (Cashmore 1)

What people often tend to forget is that rap is not the first genre of music that has drawn great controversy. Over time, there has always been at least one genre of music that has drummed up issues, whether it be heavy metal rock, jazz, or even blues, music just wouldn’t be music without a little bit of flak and something to debate. Author Amy Binder puts this into perspective in her book “Constructing Racial Rhetoric: Media Depictions of Harm in Heavy Metal and Rap Music” by articulating, “Popular music has always been denigrated by adult society. Musical genres like the blues, jazz, and early rock and roll and dances like the jitter bug, samba, and rhumba provoked complaints from the older generation about the perversion and general corruption of its children. Thus, the controversy that made its way into the limelight in the late 1980s to early 1990s was one episode in an ongoing debate” (Binder 757).

Since there are so many varying opinions out there, I wanted to discover some of my own, so I decided to obtain my own primary research by creating a survey. Since I am currently living on a college campus, I thought that it was the perfect setting to conduct research, since the primary age group that this essay focuses on is teenagers and young adults. I wanted to see how different students would respond to the various questions that I asked in order to help me gain a perspective on what different people think about rap. By doing this research I hoped to discover differing opinions on the genre, but more specifically I wanted to see if there were any patterns in the responses, such as if those who say they love rap thought one way consistently versus those who say they dislike rap having opposite views consistently, or if there was any overlapping responses.

For my research, I sat in the main lobby of the building that I live in, and I asked the first 25 students who walked past me to fill out the survey. The method of choosing students was completely random, and I got a wide variety of age, gender, and ethnicity which I believe was crucial. What I found by doing this survey was that those who claimed to listen to rap music at least relatively frequently tended to have very similar responses to the majority of the other six questions, while those who said that they rarely or never listened to rap also showed similarities in their other responses.

As you can see in the first graph, 23 out of the 25 total students that filled out my survey claimed to listen to at least some rap/hip-hop music every single day. I found this to be a remarkable number, as it proves that despite the large amounts of negativity surrounding the genre, it is clearly the most popular among today’s youth. Interestingly enough, however, 9 of the 25 students believed that rap music has a negative influence on the youth, while only 4 argued that its influence was positive. The answer that the most students responded to this question with was “undecided”, as this section tallied up 12 students. I believe that so many students were undecided on this particular question due to the broadness of it, as they appeared to feel that it was unfair to label an entire genre of music as being either positive or negative. I was very pleased to get this sort of outcome, as it strongly supports the idea that each individual rap artist deserves a fair chance to be heard, rather than just assuming that their music will be full of inappropriate language and messages.

I decided to group the above two charts together because I believe that the questions asked went hand in hand. Despite the fact that 22 out of the 25 students asked believed that rap music played either some sort of role or a significant role in crime and drug use among teens, 22 out of the 25 followed up that question by claiming that it would be unfair to hold these rappers accountable for any of the mishaps that their music potentially led to. I believe that this information is crucial to this study because it proves that no matter how bad a person may think rap music is, at the end of the day the only person to blame for any crime or violence is that person who commits the act. The old “if he told you to jump off of a bridge would you do that too?” saying applies perfectly to this study, as the person who is rapping certain lyrics is simply doing just that, rapping, rather than actually forcing anybody to do anything. One of the most controversial rap artists of all time, Eminem, explained this theory perfectly in his song “Sing for the Moment”, one of his hit singles from his 2002 studio album *The Eminem Show*, in which he raps, “They say music can alter moods and talk to you, well, can it load a gun up for you and cock it too? Well if it can, then the next time you assault a dude, just tell the judge it was my fault, and I’ll get sued!”

For as long as the genre exists, there will always be a fairly large amount of people who are strongly against it and would like to see it gone. I feel bad for those people, as rap music is booming now more than ever, and shows absolutely no sign of slowing down. I’m not saying that everyone needs to like rap, as it certainly isn’t for everyone, but I would like to see the amount of hate and backlash that it receives decrease significantly. I don’t want to see my parents roll their eyes when they ask me what I’m listening to and I respond with Lil Wayne, Eminem, Drake, or one of the many other rap artists that I enjoy. Even though every one of the artists I just listed use profanity in the majority of their songs, their music has many more layers and dynamics than just that. No matter what mood I happen to be in I can throw on one of their songs and instantly be in a better place, and that alone is worth something far more valuable than being hung up over a couple bad words in my opinion.